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Pluralism in Islam

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Pluralism is a word defined by the scholars as the autonomy enjoyed by disparate groups within a society, such groups as religious, trade union, ethnic minorities etc. The term also refers to the doctrine of the existence of such groups. Pluralism also views as cosmic power as mediated and expressed through a multiplicity of religions or otherwise views as best understood in terms of ultimate atomic units, with no claims made for the supremacy of any one of them¹.

In Quranic paradigm there are two types of liabilities upon a Muslim. One is the liabilities of Allah (Huqooqullah). Like, Salah, Fasting, Haj etc. They are only linked to Allah, for the reason that, if a Muslim neglects these responsibilities these cause no harm to any living being.

The other types of liabilities are linked to living beings (Huqook-ul-Ibaad). These include all responsibilities of man related to his surrounding things other than God. These are responsibilities related to whole society whether, he is a human being, animal, plant and non living thing etc. The question about Huqooqul Ibad will be tougher than Huququllah on the Day of Judgment especially those responsibilities related to common human being. A large part of these responsibilities related to Non-Muslims of the society.² A Muslim is

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liable to discharge both of his duties with equal sense of responsibility. The concept of pluralism is deeply rooted in the term Huququl Ibad. If a Muslim is neglecting the rights of Non-Muslims in his society he is denying Huququl Ibad as well as projecting wrong image of Islam to others which is a grave sin in itself.

In this context, Prophet Muhammad described a good deed as an act which benefits others, such as planting a seed, knowing well that, when it grows to be a full-fledged tree it will serve generations of wayfarers with fruit and the shade.

Islam means peace; and a Muslim is one who brings peace.³ To be a Muslim (or to be religious) is to be a peace maker; one who constantly seeks to mitigate conflicts and nurtures goodwill for peaceful co-existence. God wants us to live in peace and harmony with His creation; life and matter. Indeed that is the purpose of religion.⁴ Every Muslim is a carrier of the peace flag.

Islam is indeed an all embracing idea and justice is its core value. When there is justice, it puts people at ease; they are released from the fear that someone is going to hurt them or they fear that they will have to pay for their actions if they are unjust to others. The middle path, as the Prophet called, is the key for peaceful living. When there is justice, one's focus turns to living the life.⁵ No one would be lying to others; no one would be cheating, abusing or usurping what belongs to others, no one would be taking advantage of the weak. The description of the day of the judgment is simply the pinnacle of learning about individual

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responsibility. You would stand on your own, neither your parents, nor the kids, nor your wealth or even the Prophet is going to do anything for you; your only defense is the good you have done to others.⁶ God is just and will serve justice to every human being. By the way, Quran has assured God's blessing and grace to every human who is Just - Muslim or not.

For the followers of the Quran (a manual) Islam is a complete way of life. However, others have their own manuals to follow to achieve peaceful co-existence. Islam recognizes all the sacred (Semitic) books and their messages. It accepts all prophets of those traditions. It defines itself as the last and perfect religion of Semitic tradition and states that no other religion will be accepted from anybody else other than itself.⁷ We have to make our own pathways without conflict and create that heaven on the earth. Islam proclaims peaceful coexistence with others and calls Muslims to have a good dialogue even during bitter discussion:

"Call thou to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the better way" (Quran 16:125).

"Let him who will, believe, let him who will, reject (faith)" (Quran 18: 29).

"Say: O unbelievers, I worship not what you worship and you are not worshipping what I worship nor I worshipping what you have worshiped, neither are you worshipping what I worship. To you your religion and to me my religion". (Quran 109:1-6)

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The Quran makes a great compliment to Christians:

“And nearest among them in love to the Believers will thou find those who say: We are Christians, because amongst these are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant”
(Quran 5:82)

At any rate, there is no doubt that Islam as a religion and Muslims as a community are more pluralistic at socio-cultural level than other religions. If we claim that Islam (or Muslims) is also more successful than others in dealing with cultural differences, we shouldn't exaggerate at all. This has been proved in some historical places like Istanbul, Jerusalem and Cairo and even in Christian Spain or in the Balkan Peninsula.⁸

According to Islam nobody should be forced to convert or to adopt Islam by any means or under any circumstances. “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error: Whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks. And God hears and knows all things”(Quran 2: 256)⁹. Prophet Muhammad implemented the requirements of this verse and prohibited his companions from compelling people to accept Islam. Belief is valuable when freedom of choice is in place.

The Quran wants people to have a good relation with others. “O mankind! Verily we have created you of a male and female; and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware” (Quran 49: 13). From this verse we understand that God created people

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from a mother and a father, His wisdom decreed that they are made into tribes and nations, who despite their multitude and variety, descend from the same origin. While different in language, colour, culture, homeland and means of power, they worship one God. No people can be Master of another, or a colour superior to another, since they descend from the same origin and turn to the same God. People should know each other with setting up good relations and shouldn't try to view one another with mutual suspicion, malice and hatred. Thus Islam eliminates all kinds of discriminations from its racial and ethnological concept and establishes mutual acquaintance among people as it was shown in the early period of Islamic history.

When Prophet Muhammad first received the divine revelation, his wife Khadija took him to her relative Waraqa bin Nawfal, "who had some knowledge of the Bible and may have been a Christian"¹⁰. Waraqa reassured Muhammad that what he experienced was similar to what had happened to Moses and was a divine revelation; When the number of Muslims increased in Mecca and they were persecuted by the pagan Meccans, "the Negus of Abyssinia –who ruled over a Nestorian Christian kingdom gave them refuge and accepted a group of emigrant Muslims into his country in 616 / 618 CE. Pagans applied to him for extradition of Muslims.

The king of Abyssinia refused the deportation of Muslims after listening to what Muslims had to say about Jesus as a major prophet¹¹; When Prophet Muhammad arrived in Madina,

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he established a relation and value system which connects people through religion and citizenship. Immediately after he settled in Madina, the Prophet formed a constitution, a treaty which regulates the affairs of all the inhabitants of Medina, and signed a pact with the Jews: in article 25: "The Jews of Banu 'Avf are a community (ummah) along with the believers. To the Jews their religion (din) and to the Muslims their religion" In article 37: It is for the Jews to bear their expenses and for the Muslims to bear their expenses. Between them (that is to one another) there is help (nasr) against whoever goes against the people of this document. Between them, is sincere friendship and honorable dealing (not treachery)"¹². Later, the Prophet extended the act of citizenship and co-operation to the Christians of Najran: "This is a letter from Muhammad the prophet, the Messenger of God, to the people of Najran... Najran and their followers have protection (jiwar) of God and the dhimmah of Muhammad the prophet, the Messenger of God, for themselves, their community, their land, and their goods, both those who are absent and those who are present, and for their churches and services (no bishop will be moved from his episcopate, and no monk from his monastic position, and no church-warden from his church-warden ship) and for all, great or little, that is under their hands"¹³.

In Islamic culture, the term al-dhimmah is formed to define the status of such groups of people as the Jews and Christians who lived within the Islamic political domain. It means pact, trust, surety. A Dhimmi is a party to covenant who has been given a promise to feel secure about his property, honor and religion. Al-dhimmah grants the Christians and Jews

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an equal status with Muslims in religious, economic and administrative domains. In return they are asked to pay, jizyah, the poll tax. Although the al-dhimmah status itself was initiated for Christians and Jews, it was also applied to Zoroastrians when Persia was conquered and to Hindus and Buddhists when India came under the rule of Islam¹⁴. The Prophet said that, "Feed the hungry, visit the sick and release the captive"¹⁵. This order was not only for Muslims or their people, but also it was a duty for Muslims to do for others as well as the Prophet did. He paid a visit to a young Jew who fell ill, which means that it is permissible to visit, compliment and entertain them.

The constitution of Madina, and other covenants of the Prophet with Jews and Christians, laid down the principles for building a multi-cultural and multi-religious community. These fundamental rules that the Prophet established have been practiced throughout Islamic history¹⁶. After Prophet Muhammad, the caliphs and Muslims in general followed the same way: When Jerusalem came under the rule of Islam, Omar the second caliph, signed a pact with the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which granted security for them and their property. It recognized rights of the Jews and Christians of Jerusalem freely to practice their religion; their churches and synagogues were respected and left intact¹⁷.

Non-Muslims have always been encouraged to participate in and contribute to the intellectual and political life of the community under Islamic rule. The Christians and Jews were welcomed to hold posts in public offices. Some of them became ministers, especially

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in the periods of The Abbasids, Mamluks and Ottomans. Religious tolerance was well observed by the Muslim rulers of Christian Spain. At that time, in Spanish cities like Cordova, Seville and Toledo; Christians, Jews and Muslims lived in peaceful co-existence and many distinguished scholars and philosophers played a crucial role for culture exchange, the most famous of whom was Moses Maimonides.¹⁸

In Islamic history, religious persecution of the members of other faiths was almost absent. The verse “Let there be no compulsion in religion” has banned Muslims from practicing what is called religious persecution against non-Muslims. Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were not subject to exile, apostasy or death, which was the choice, offered to Muslims and Jews in re-conquered Spain. And Christians and Jews were not subject to any major territorial and occupational restrictions such as were the common lot of Jews in pre-modern Europe¹⁹.

We always think that the severe and some bad experiences humanity lived in past happened somehow and will never occur again in our times or in the future. But unfortunately this is a wishful thinking. It is clear that the Old Testament for the Jews, the New Testament for Christians and the Quran for Muslims are, above all, religious messages. Despite that, Jews, Muslims and Christians may aim at constituting a universal form of true unique monotheism²⁰. So there is no reason for not realizing an interactive dialogue and mutual understanding between them for a peaceful world especially for a peaceful Middle

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East and the world. They have to go beyond some dialogue and reach at some points in which their children should learn that they are following the same tradition and no reason to be distant from or aggressive against each other.

Endnotes and References

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10. Ibid., p. 359-360.
11. Al-Faruqi, "World Theology", p. 447.

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12. Narrated by Al-Bukhari, Mishkat Al-Masabih, hadith No 1523.
13. M. Watt, A Short History of Islam, op.cit., s. p.134.
14. Ibid., p.146.
15. Abu Ja'far Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk, Vol. 3, 609, quoted in Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Khatip al-Tameemi, "Pluralism and Its Limits in the Holy Quran" in Proceedings of the 6th Muslim-Christian Consultation, held in Istanbul, 11-13 September, 1989, p. 40-45.
16. Islam has given dhimmis of the Islamic community equal religions and cultural rights alongside Muslims. In other words, their autonomy and their internal affairs and their freedom to practice, and their religion were guaranteed.
17. Al-Faruqi, "World Theology", op.cit., p. 445-446.
18. Bernard Lewis, The Jews of Islam, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984, p.8
19. Ibid., p.24-5.

Maurice Borrmans, "Pluralism and its Limits in the Quran and the Bible", Religious Pluralism: Proceedings of The 6th Muslim-Christian Consultation Held in Collaboration with the Orthodox Center, Istanbul 1989, p.78-79. Father Borrmans raised and discussed many questions about the relation between three religions in his essay like "How are the others considered? How are the others called? How is their salvation envisaged? What attitude to have vis-à-vis them